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ABSTRACT

This study examined the attitudes of junior and senior studio art majors toward their education and choice of school through analysis of questionnaires completed by 22 students, fieldnotes, and in-depth interviews with 6 students. Students were also questioned concerning what connection they saw between their matriculation and their expectations for the future. The study design was a holistic single-case study with the whole group of respondents being the unit of analysis. It contrasted a general group picture created using a general categorical analysis with individual profiles developed through approaching the same data as narrative. This analysis showed that although the respondents were complimentary about the high quality of their art education, their main reasons for choosing to attend the particular institution were proximity to home and relatively low tuition. The analysis also showed that many of the respondents were expecting to have a difficult time after graduation, trying to accomplish the multiple goals of getting admitted to a graduate art program, becoming a practicing artist, and finding a survival job. Profiles of three students interviewed demonstrate the study's methodology and findings. (CK)

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Drawing on Narratives to Create Individual Portraits of Informants

Abstract

Like visual artists, case study researchers choose not only the media but also the degree of abstraction to use in portraying their participants. A general group picture of college Studio Art students, created using a general categorical analysis, is contrasted to the rich individual portraits painted by approaching the same data as an inquiry into narrative.

Introduction

Conducting case study research is an artistic process. As a visual artist can choose from numerous Art materials to use, singly or in combination, so the case study researcher can choose from numerous, rich sources of data. As the artist can use those materials to create works showing various perspectives of the same subject, in varying degrees of abstraction or realism, so the researcher can organize the data in various ways ranging from general themes to specific, individual narratives.

Holistic Single-Case Study Analysis

Accordingly, the data from this qualitative case study about junior and senior students majoring in Studio Art areas (Painting, Drawing, Printmaking, Ceramics, etc.) at a state university could be analyzed in various ways. The case study investigated how these Art students perceived their educational experiences and what connections they saw between their matriculation and their future plans. The design was that of a holistic single-case study (Yin, p. 44), with the whole group of respondents being the unit of analysis. The data included fieldnotes, photographs of student artworks, written questionnaires from 22 respondents, and transcripts of in-depth interviews with six of them.

To write the initial case study report, I made a general inductive analysis of the integrated data, using various analytic techniques (Yin, pg. 100), including a matrix of categories, data charts, etc. This analysis produced a good general description of the group of Studio Art students and categories relevant to them (Thaller, 1993). The demographics showed that the "average" respondent was a single female, 24.5 years old, a junior in the Bachelor of Fine Art (B.F.A.) program, majoring in Painting or Ceramics -- a description which, of course, did not actually fit any of the 22 respondents exactly.

The group analysis showed that although the respondents were complimentary about the high quality of their Art training, their main reasons for choosing to attend that university were proximity to home and relatively low tuition. The respondents seemed very dedicated to Art, with creating artworks the primary focus of their educational experience. Although most respondents did not think earning recognition for their artwork would be very important, 82% thought it was very important to continue creating Art after graduation. Although they felt well prepared to create artwork, 82% indicated that they needed help in learning business and marketing skills essential for Studio Artists. Many felt that their matriculation was specifically preparing them to be Graduate students in Art, and 73% were thinking of going to Graduate School, although they could not be admitted to the local Master of Fine Art program.

The analysis of the group also showed that many of the respondents were expecting to have a difficult time after graduation, trying to accomplish multiple goals of getting admitted to a Graduate Art program, becoming a practicing artist, and finding a survival job. Although many described negative past experiences in jobs that were unsuitable for them, 50% were expecting to support themselves after graduation through "menial jobs," "odd jobs," "anything that won't degrade" themselves, and any kind of work "that pays a half-way decent wage." The majority estimated their earn-

ings for the first few years after graduation would be below or close to the current "poverty level." Only one respondent estimated that income would be more than costs of living. While the primary goal for that Art Department was to make the students into the best artists possible without regard to employment, 41% of the respondents said that one of their reasons for attending college was to get a better job after graduation. Although they were worrying about their future finances, most of them did not take any job-related college courses outside of Art. None had gone into the campus Career Services Center for help, and there was a tendency to rely very heavily on Art faculty for career counseling.

This holistic analysis yielded informative data and filled a gap in the existing literature about college art students. However, much of the richness inherent in the data was lost in that analysis process.

Narrative Analysis in an Embedded Case Study

While the group data tells a great deal about the group of students, it tells nothing about them as individuals who have decided to major in Studio Art. To remedy that, it is also possible to treat this study like an "embedded" case study design which involves more than one unity of analysis, with attention focused on the individual participants as well as on the group of Studio Art students (Yin, pg. 44). A narrative analysis of the interview transcripts can yield much information about the informants' experiences as individual college students.

In the process of collecting narratives, it is important to understand the characteristics of the participants in order to select the best "response mode" to use (Hedberg & Stoel-Gammon). In this case study, attempting to gather written narratives from the participants had very disappointing results. The questionnaire included a lot of space for the respondents to write their answers to the open-ended questions. However,

very few of them wrote much on the questionnaire, with most answering in single words or short phrases (with words often misspelled), and occasionally no answer at all. By contrast, the answers that they gave orally to similar questions asked during the interviews were much longer, more complex, and more enlightening.

Take for example, one respondent's answer to why she had chosen to attend this university instead of another college or art school. On the questionnaire, Suzanna had written tersely, "My parents forced me to." Since this answer could be interpreted in many ways, I asked her during the interview if her parents had forced her to go to college or to go to this particular university and received the following explanation:

> They forced me to come here. They both graduated from here, and I wanted to go farther away from home. And they didn't want me to. And I was looking at state schools and other places too, and private schools. But they said, "You know, we went there and we'd like you to go there, at least for a year just to try it out." So I came here for the year and decided that I'd stay. . . . They knew I wanted to come for art and they knew that this was the best art school in the state. And that's why they wanted me to come here. And plus the fact, it's three hours away (from home) which was, you know, a long enough (distance) for me to be away from home but a short enough distance that I could come home any time I wanted.

Later in the interview, Suzanna added, "I consider that I really 'lucked out.' I mean I've ended up with some (professors) that really care about what I want to do. And so -- I'm very grateful that I came to this university, even though it's not an art school." Thus, while survey questionnaires may encourage respondents to reduce their experiences to fragments, allowing them to tell stories can provide a way for individuals to communicate the complexity of their lives (Graham).

The type of interviews utilized in this qualitative case study were semi-structured or focused interviews (Yin, pg. 82), guided but not dominated by a set of questions. As Polkinghorne mentioned, "Narratives are a recurrent and prominent feature of

accounts offered in all types of interviews. If respondents are allowed to continue in their own way until they indicate that they have completed their answers, they are likely to relate stories." (Polkinghorne, p. 163). Thus, the interview transcripts actually became a collection of stories or narratives (Mishler, 1986a). During the interviews, the informants in this study had told stories about their past jobs, their relationships with others, and certain decisions in their lives. These narratives, which did not really "fit" well into a categorical analysis, gave rich insights into the informants' perceptions of their educational experiences and their career attitudes. The rest of this paper will present brief narrative portraits of three of the informants.

Portrait of Lauren

Lauren was a Painting major, about 38 years old, who was commuting about 76 miles from the farm where she lived with her husband and four children, ages 8 to 18 years. She was vivacious, tall, blonde, attractive, and dressed neater while in the Art Building than most of the other Art students did. She seemed to enjoy talking with her studio mates and with the visiting professor who was teaching Painting that semester.

Since creating artwork was the major focus of the undergraduate experience, it was impossible to "know" the informants without becoming familiar with their artwork. Lauren's small studio cubicle was jammed with her giant canvases about 5' by 8' that first appeared to be mainly streaks or splatters of oil paint reminiscent of Jackson Pollock's paintings. When asked to describe her work, Lauren said,

> It's paint. Totally paint. I don't have a particular idea when I start painting and it sort of develops, just like layers and layers and then maybe it's o.k. If you don't recognize something from this world, it's o.k. And if you do, then that's o.k. too. Layers of paint. I just love pushing it around.

Evidently, Lauren's paintings were also for her a metaphor for her educational experiences. When asked about the connections between college and her future, she

said, "It's like my paintings, you put down a layer and another layer, and eventually you're going to get there. And you're going to get there. That's the way life is. Just keep going."

For Lauren's final critique in Painting one semester, I joined several other students who were helping her carry all her paintings down the hall to spread them out in a classroom so the painting professor could look at them in order to give her a final grade for the semester. (It was too crowded to view the large canvases in her small studio space.) The other students sat in on her critique and then helped her carry all the paintings back to the studio, where she and I then sat down alone for her interview.

Later, when I began to do a narrative analysis of Lauren's interview, I realized the significance of this group activity. Lauren described her current college experiences with narratives about receiving help from other people, using some form of the word "help" 15 times in the interview. She said, "Being out of school for 20 years and then starting back is tough right off to start with. So you just have to keep working and building. And if you've got help, it's o.k. You can handle it." Lauren also expressed anxiety about her future career plans because a friend working in that field did not get help and moral support from others.

Lauren seemed to have some ambivalence about her future career plans. She had chosen Art in college because she had not been able to take any Art in high school and had always wanted to try it. When first starting her college degree, her original plan was to teach art in high school after graduation in order to help pay for her children's college educations. So she was doing a double major in Art and Art Education. However, somewhere along the line, she had started wanting to be an Art professor in college and began to wish to finish a Master of Fine Art (M.F.A.). This could be rather difficult since she was not free to relocate, neither to get into an M.F.A. program nor to compete for a college teaching position afterwards. When asked about

her goals, she said, "I've got college as a goal. And now -- I want to teach. But if I could just paint , that's what I'd do. If I could teach and make enough money to get my kids through college, then I'd paint in a heartbeat."

Portrait of Sally

Another Painting major, Sally was of medium build, had short straight dark hair, fair skin, and brown eyes. In the Art Building, she dressed in loose shirts and slacks. Rather quiet in a group, Sally spoke very slowly, with long pauses, considering her words very carefully, eyes often downcast as she spoke. Then 33 years old, she had left the western state where she was raised and moved to the university town a number of years before this study because she had friends living here.

In the west, Sally had started college as a major in Biology, which influenced her current artwork. When asked to describe her work, she said, "I've kind of tended to be . . . a "minimalist" . . . And my interests mainly are concerned with the natural world. I use a lot of organic kinds of shapes. And I've gotten equally interested in the content as I am with producing an object." As part of her participation in the B.F.A. Honors Exhibit, she was planning to do a "video installation" featuring a video she had made about ecology and conservation.

I first talked to Sally a few weeks before the interview when I found her alone in the Senior Painting studio room. It was during the time the Painting class was scheduled, and all six or eight students should have been there, as the students were in the Junior Painting studio down the hall. But Sally was about the only one I ever saw there. Sally said she thought the others might be coming in during the weekends to paint. During the first part of the semester, the class had frequent group meetings. Then the visiting professor in Painting was disappointed in the other students because they were not working as hard as he thought they should. So, the last part of the

semester, the Senior group just had not been meeting, probably due to a combination of the students' not showing up and of the professor's not wanting to meet. However, Sally was always there alone painting during that time. She expressed unhappiness that her year had been so much more solitary than she had expected.

On Sally's completed questionnaire I had noticed that she was hoping to go to Graduate School for an M.F.A. In conversation, she said she had started applying "late" since she had not started applying until January. Also she had applied to six schools that had very popular M.F.A. programs. One school had specifically said that they had received 102 applicants for only a few graduate slots. At the time of the interview, four schools had sent Sally rejection letters, one had sent a nebulously worded letter she could not tell was acceptance or rejection; and one had still not responded. At that time, she had not decided what to do yet if she did not get accepted somewhere. As she considered her alternatives, she told stories about unhappy jobs she had had in the past. (The week following the interview, she received rejection notices from the rest of the graduate Art schools, and she started job-hunting locally.)

During her last years in college, Sally's main career goal had been to go on into an M.F.A. program in order to become a college Art professor. However, she was rather emotionally shaken by the difficulty of getting into graduate school, since she had no alternate plan. She was even beginning to question the practicality of going on to graduate school. She realized that after borrowing money for three more years of study, she still might not be able to find a position in a job market flooded with M.F.A. graduates. On her questionnaire, Sally had written, "The things I have done in college seem most to have prepared me to be a Fine Art graduate students. I suspect I have learned a certain amount of persistence and discipline, but no direct job skills."

Portrait of Matthew

Matthew was one of the students I learned to recognize when I was conducting the survey and doing participant observation in the Art Building. At the time of the survey, he was 22 years old and was expecting to graduate the next year. With dark hair, fair skin, and brown eyes, Matthew was of medium build and height. When working on artwork, he tended to wear clothes in odd layers and color combinations but dressed rather conservatively for social art events. Although most of his works resembled paintings, he was majoring in Drawing because of the "artistic freedom" in that area of concentration.

Matthew and Kenny, another respondent, shared one of the Drawing studios, that was twice as large as the other studios but still cramped for two. The semester of the survey I got permission from a Drawing professor to attend what was supposed to have been a final group critique of the whole advanced Drawing class. However, most of the students begged off because they had other art tasks they wanted and needed to do at that time. So it was actually a critique of just three students: Matthew, Kenny and one other student who was a double major in Drawing/Art Education. Thus, I had the opportunity to see Matthew's work and hear him talk about it at that time. He had just started working with tar (actually roof patching asphalt) combined with oil paint, doing a series of about ten "drawings" on pieces of plywood about 18" by 24." The series consisted of seven black and white panels painted with sections of a poem and three panels with colored rather abstract flower images.

The following year, Matthew was one of the students in the B.F.A. Honors Exhibit, and I talked to him and his girlfriend at that "Opening." When I learned that he and Kenny planned to have an exhibit in the downtown student gallery that summer, I told him I would like to interview him at the gallery when he had to be there anyway. I attended their Opening reception at the student gallery on Friday evening. It was very

"low-key" -- just a few friends and a few family members attended, many bringing snacks to add to the refreshment spread, traditional at openings. Matthew's girlfriend, who had broken up with him, came in very briefly. While I was talking to Matthew and Kenny, I found out that they were taking turns keeping the gallery open for the next two days and made plans to interview Matthew the following day.

It was after 3:30 before I arrived at the gallery on Saturday. Matthew said it was going "pretty well" and about 15 people had been there to visit so far. (I did not tell him that I did not think 15 visitors was very good for over six hours.) When asked to describe one piece of his artwork, Matthew described an abstract tryptich and went into great detail explaining how he worked with a combination of tar and oil paints so that the finished paintings would gradually self-destruct. He said,

> The whole purpose of putting all this on tar, you know, the title's "Immortal" but this is not about being immortal, it's about mortality. And about the . . . cultural need for immortality, especially in this age. I got started on this project looking at a photo book that I used to have of "memorial death photography" which is something that . . . doesn't exist now. This is an age where thru cosmetics and and so on, we're trying to deny age, deny death. I don't see that as really a positive thing. And so this piece is sort of a commentary.

As Matthew continued, he explained how his interest in Eastern religions and a philosophical approach to art had influenced his work, starting with a "shaman" series and moving into the series intended to self-destruct.

Matthew also aspired to become a college Art professor. He identified with one particular professor who had served as a role model and had been especially helpful when he was having personal problems. Also that professor had helped to convince him to major in Art in the first place. Although, Matthew had taken four years of art courses in high school, he did not think he "was good enough" to major in Studio Art.

Regarding his goal of becoming a college Art professor, Matthew said that as a professor he wanted to be able to help students in the way his professor had helped him.

As he talked, Matthew mentioned the difficulty of getting admitted to a graduate school and of finding a way to finance three more years of study. He said that he believed Studio Art students needed more help with planning their career and with developing money management skills that related to art. He thought there should be a career-oriented course available to Studio Art students to help them with their future plans.

Summary

While analyzing the data into themes and categories created a general, rather abstract picture of the group of participants, approaching the same data as an inquiry into narrative can allow the case study researcher to paint rich, intimate portraits of the individual informants, their past experiences, and their future expectations. In addition, the process also works in both directions. As seen in the way the individual narratives shed light on a group aspiration to become Art professors and some of the problems encountered in working toward that goal, the individual narratives also enrich our knowledge of the experiences of the group of informants.

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